

LOCAL TIES: Grafton man's ancestor invented the gas mask

Nasmith saved thousands in First World War

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GRAFTON — Any discussion of length about the First World War eventually includes the terrible cost.

Casualty figures indicate that 10 million military personnel died, as did some seven million civilians. Another 20 million were wounded.

The figures would have been higher if not for the ingenuity of Col. George Galle Nasmith, who invented the gas mask.

Nasmith is an ancestor of Ted Nasmith of Grafton, who learned of this feat from a raft of family biographies given to him on a 2012 visit to Perth relatives Harry and Marjorie Nasmith.

Their hobby is researching family history and, for George Galle Nasmith, the Perth couple provided photocopies of a Toronto Star article of Nov. 25, 1979, and photocopies of his entry in a book they own called *Who's Who and Why*, 1921.

From this information, it can be learned that Nasmith was technically Dr. Nasmith, due to his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto.

Born in 1877, Nasmith was a partner in the Toronto-based Gore, Nasmith & Storrie, Consulting Engineers and Public Health Specialists. He was also an author, publishing (among other books) *Chemistry of Wheat Gluten* (1903) and *Haematology of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning* (1906).

Nasmith was working as the director of Toronto's Department of Health laboratories when war broke out, and he made an immediate contribution by devising mobile filtration units to sanitize the water the Allies used at the front. He went to war with the First Canadian Contingent as Sanitary Advisor in charge of

water purification.

Nasmith was present at the Battle of Ypres on April 22, 1915, when the Germans first used poison gas. This innovation, which was instantly felling soldiers like flies, had never been seen before. But Nasmith was one of the first to understand correctly what was happening and, within 10 days, had invented the gas mask.

It was a simple device that fit over the nose and mouth and contained a chemical-saturated pad to trap the poison gas and destroy its effectiveness. A million of them were hastily created and distributed among the Allies.

The story Ted Nasmith got from his Perth relatives about Nasmith's first immediate reaction is more colourful.

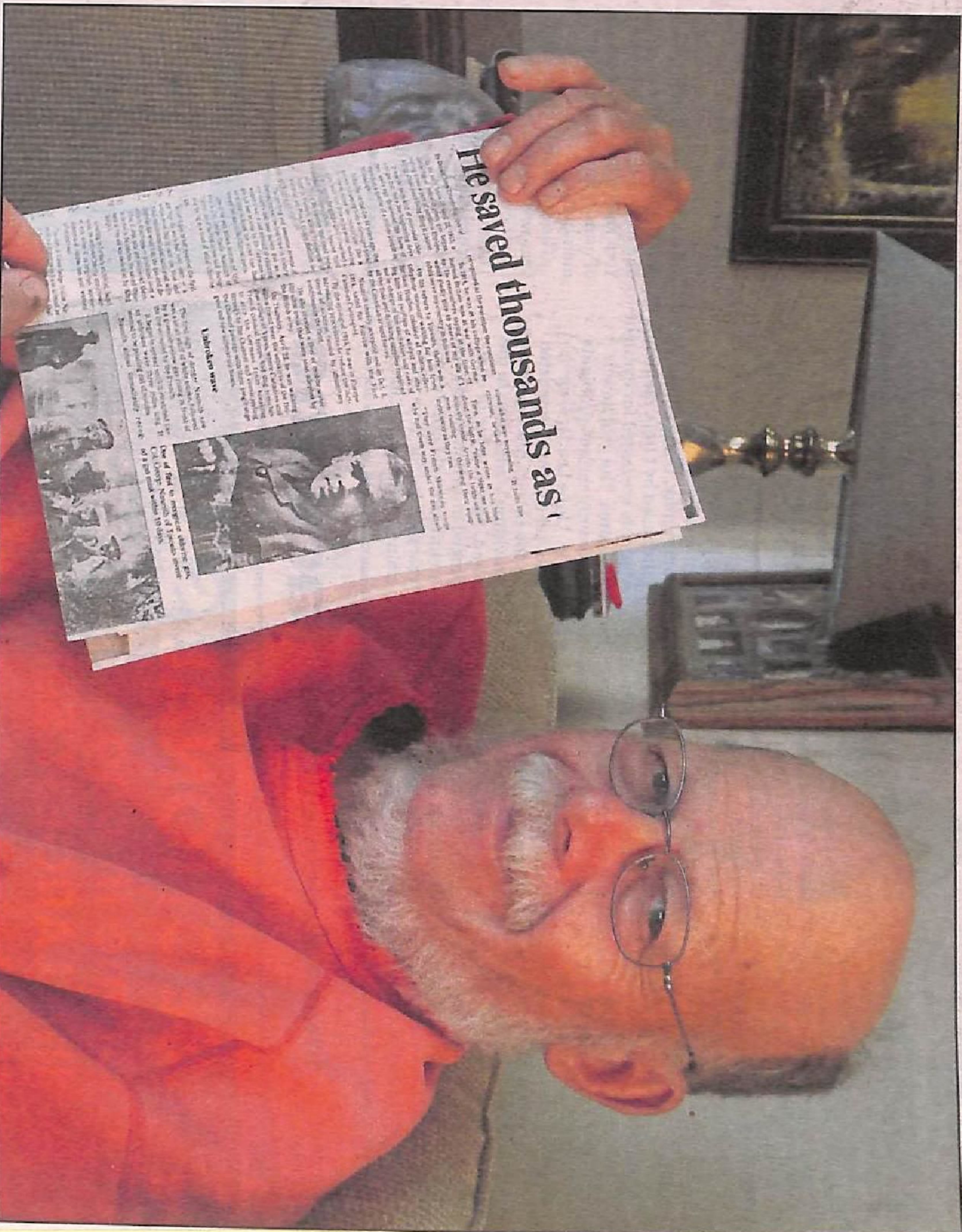
The professional chemist knew instinctively what to do — he urged everyone within earshot to urinate on a handkerchief or cloth, hold it over the nose and mouth, and breathe through it. It sounded crazy, but those who obeyed were more likely to survive the gas attack.

"He saved thousands as chlorine hit trenches," said the Toronto Star headline.

Unlike some earlier wars, most people who died in the First World War were combat fatalities. But the struggle to maintain the health of combatants in the primitive conditions at the front also inevitably accounted for some of the casualty figures of any war. Nasmith's water-sanitation measures doubtless reduced this number as well.

For saving thousands of lives with his work, he was made a Companion of St. Michael and St. George by King George V in 1916 for hygiene and sanitation work done in the field.

He died in 1965 and is buried at Toronto's Mt. Pleasant Cemetery.



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Ted Nasmith of Grafton was pleased to learn that one of his ancestors made contributions that saved thousands of lives in the First World War.

The Toronto Star story quotes archivist Scott James as saying the city archives are crowded with stories of the forgotten accomplishments of countless men and women. Ted Nasmith

would agree.

"He must have been a very humble person," Nasmith figures.

"Even though he is related to me, I didn't know about this. I

don't think my dad even knew that.

"Even though I don't think he considered himself a hero, over the years he must have been very proud to see the mask used by

firemen and others. And because of that, how many lives over the years he saved even unconnected with the war!"

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